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The Bennett Grove School: Bulloch County's Last One Room African American Schoolhouse

Inger Wood: Bulloch County Historical Society Meeting, February 24th, 2014

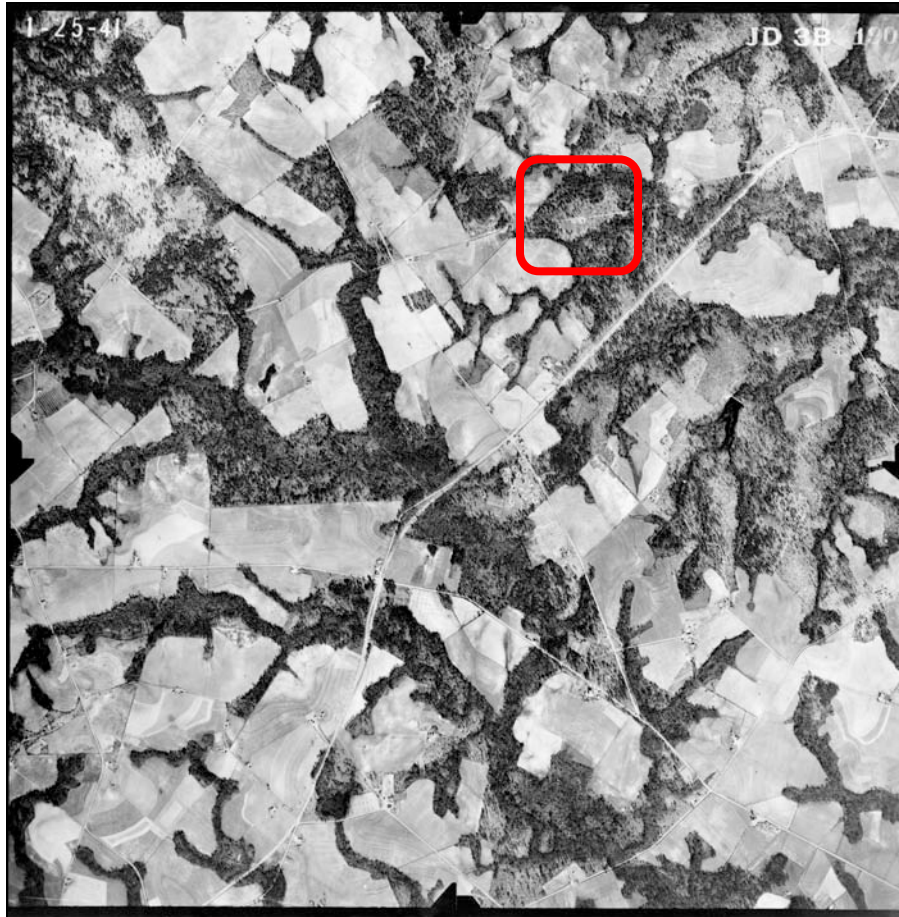
Bulloch County, like much of the nation, was once dotted with one room schoolhouses, the classic structure for education in rural areas until the middle of the twentieth century. As the numbers of these schools dwindle and the people who remember the significant role they played in rural communities pass away, it has become increasingly important to preserve what remains. There is a chance to do exactly this very close to home with the Bennett Grove School, the last standing one room African American schoolhouse in Bulloch County.

Bennett Grove was founded around 1918 by former slave Benjamin Bennett, and it served as a public school for African American students in the area northeast of Portal for thirty-four years until it was closed in 1952. Mr. Bennett donated the land on which the school sits from his own homestead, and he and the families of future students built the schoolhouse themselves. Their structure remains, albeit in rough shape, to this day. It is a one-room, wooden, braced frame structure. The building measures roughly 25 feet long by 14 feet wide, has four windows, one door at the front, another on one side near the back. The school faces north and sits on a high point in the area, with all windows situated to let in ample light for schoolwork. The old, brick-lined well that served the students and teachers of Bennett Grove is still there, about 40 feet away from the school.

Bennett Grove served children in the Portal area in the first through seventh grades, and some students continued on from there to the Willow Hill Junior High School, which taught through the tenth grade. The Willow Hill School, now the headquarters of the Heritage and Renaissance Center, was founded in 1874 and was the oldest continually-operating school in Bulloch County when it closed in 1999. Both Bennett Grove and Willow Hill stand as increasingly-rare living memorials to African American education in the period between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Era.

The Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center, which has already saved the historic Willow Hill School from demolition, converting it into a community center and museum, has received the Bennett Grove School as a donation. We have engaged in a long-term project surrounding the school, and plans are to stabilize the school and move it to the Willow Hill campus, where it will be preserved and utilized in conjunction with the existing center.

The first phase of this Bennett Grove project has largely been concerned with establishing a detailed history of the school, which is not an easy task when it comes to an African American historic resource in rural South Georgia. This presentation is an update on what we have learned so far and what plans are for the future.



Many will find this type of image familiar. It is an aerial photo taken by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in 1941. These types of photographs were taken systematically all over the country starting for the most part during the New Deal Era as one of the many “make work” programs. Thank goodness this program came about, because these images now serve as a very important tool for anyone doing historical research that involves looking at how a land area changed over time. In Georgia, we have historic aerial photographs in this standard format from the early 1930s through the 1970s. They are housed at the Map Library at the University of Georgia, but a lot of them have been digitized and you can even access them online.

This image shows an area northeast of Portal. To help get our bearings, Highway 25, also known as Highway 67, crosses Rocky Ford Road in the upper-right corner. J&T Minit Mart is a landmark at that intersection. The red box is drawn around the location of the Bennett Grove School on Harold Howell Road.



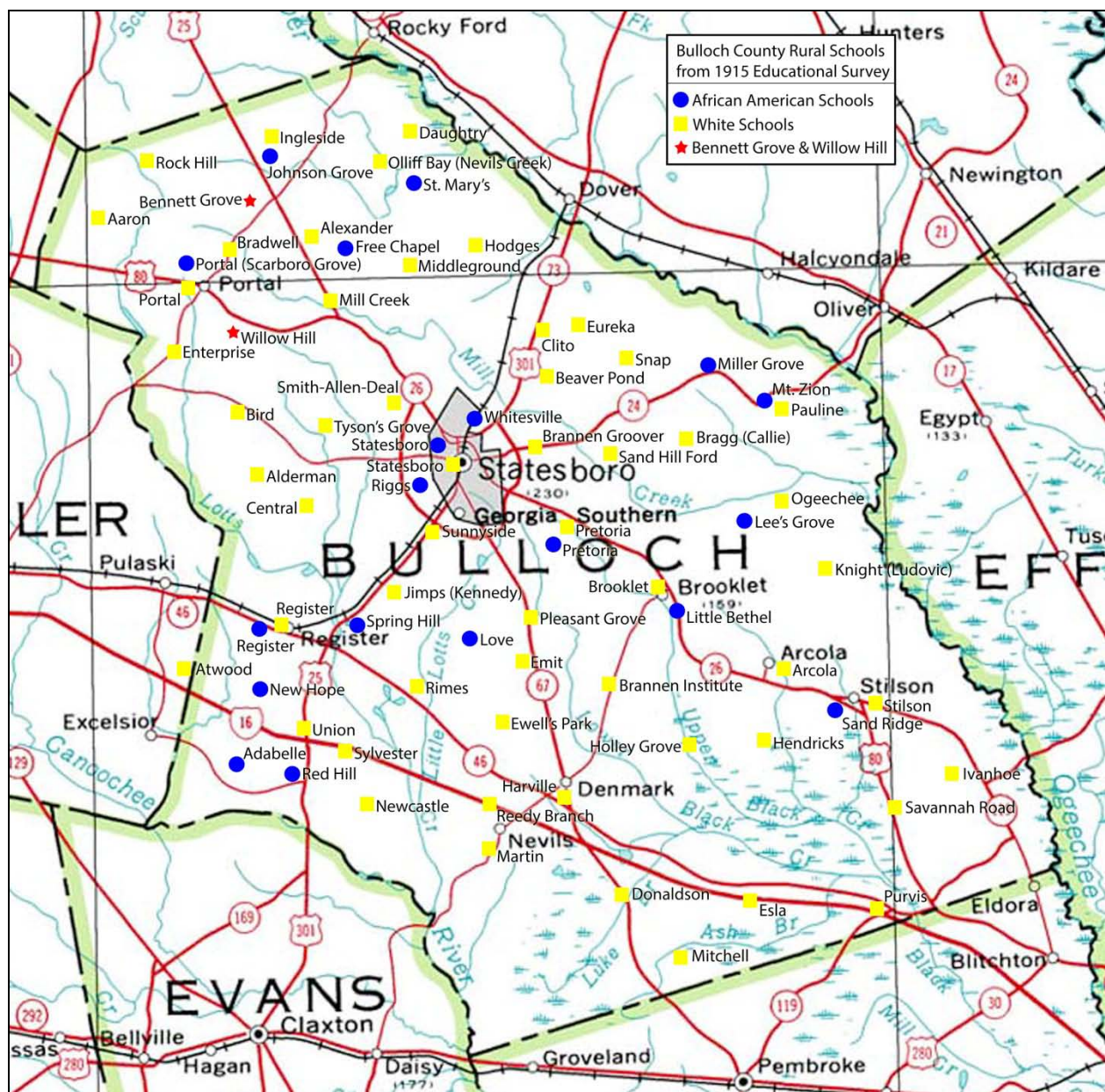
This is a zoomed in image with the schoolhouse located at the center. Even at such a great distance we can learn about the school from this photograph. Bennett Grove certainly fits the classification as a “rural school.” The faint lines that you can see branching off of the dirt road and into the woods and fields show that students walked to school frequently from the surrounding countryside, wearing down paths to the point of being visible from an airplane. This image is the closest thing we have, so far, to a historical photograph of Bennett Grove when it was in use as a school.



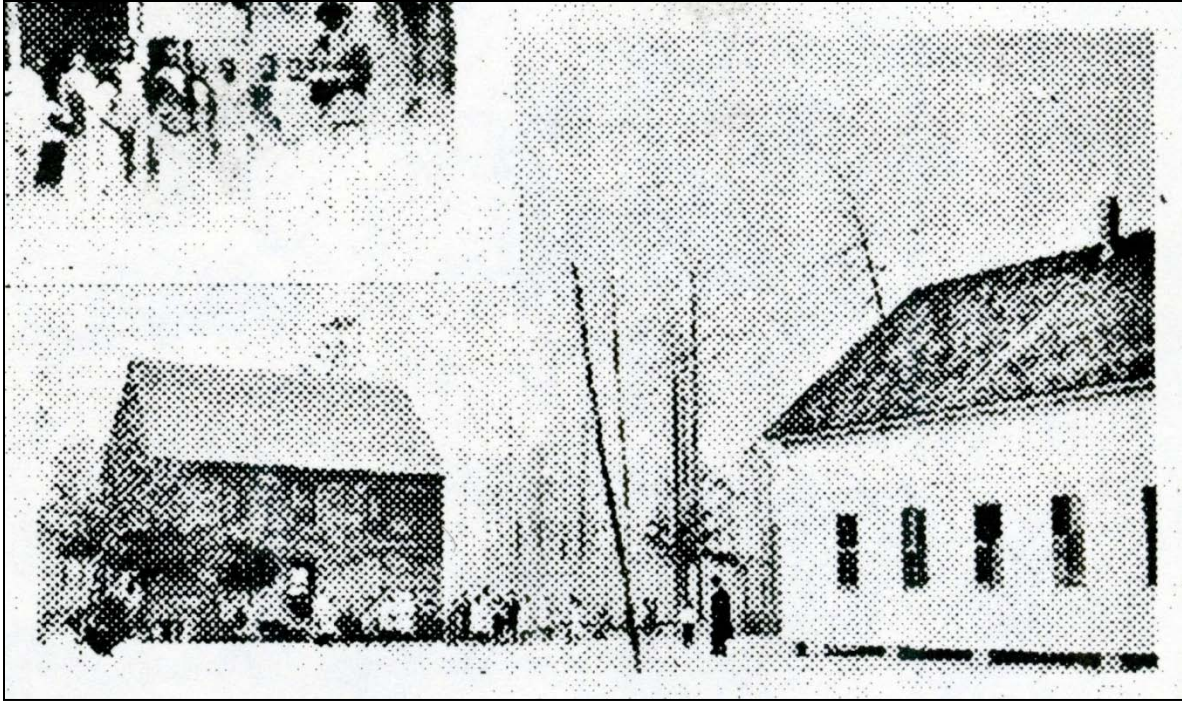
In the absence of photographs, we look to other sources for details about the story and former appearance of the Bennett Grove School.

A major historical document about local schools called the “Educational Survey of Bulloch County” was published in 1915. Although it came complete with photographs of dozens of schools and even detailed write-ups of the schools for white students, the survey was unfortunately conducted three years too early to provide information about Bennett Grove. However, it does still give us important details about rural schools of the same era.

This map was based on this survey and other research conducted by the Bulloch County chapter of the DAR and Georgia Southern Geography Professor Fred Payne. It shows the approximate locations of schools in the county in 1915 and was published in a *Statesboro Herald* article in 1996. The white squares indicate schools for white students, and the black circles indicate schools for black students.



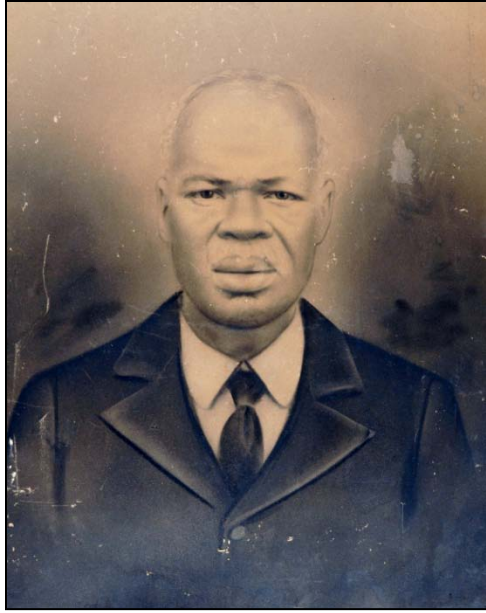
I made this map using the previous one as an overlay on top of a newer Bulloch County Highway Map to give a better idea of where all of these schools were located relative to modern landmarks. The blue circles show schools for black students and the yellow squares are white schools. I added Bennett Grove and Willow Hill to this map, and they are marked with red stars up in the northwest corner.



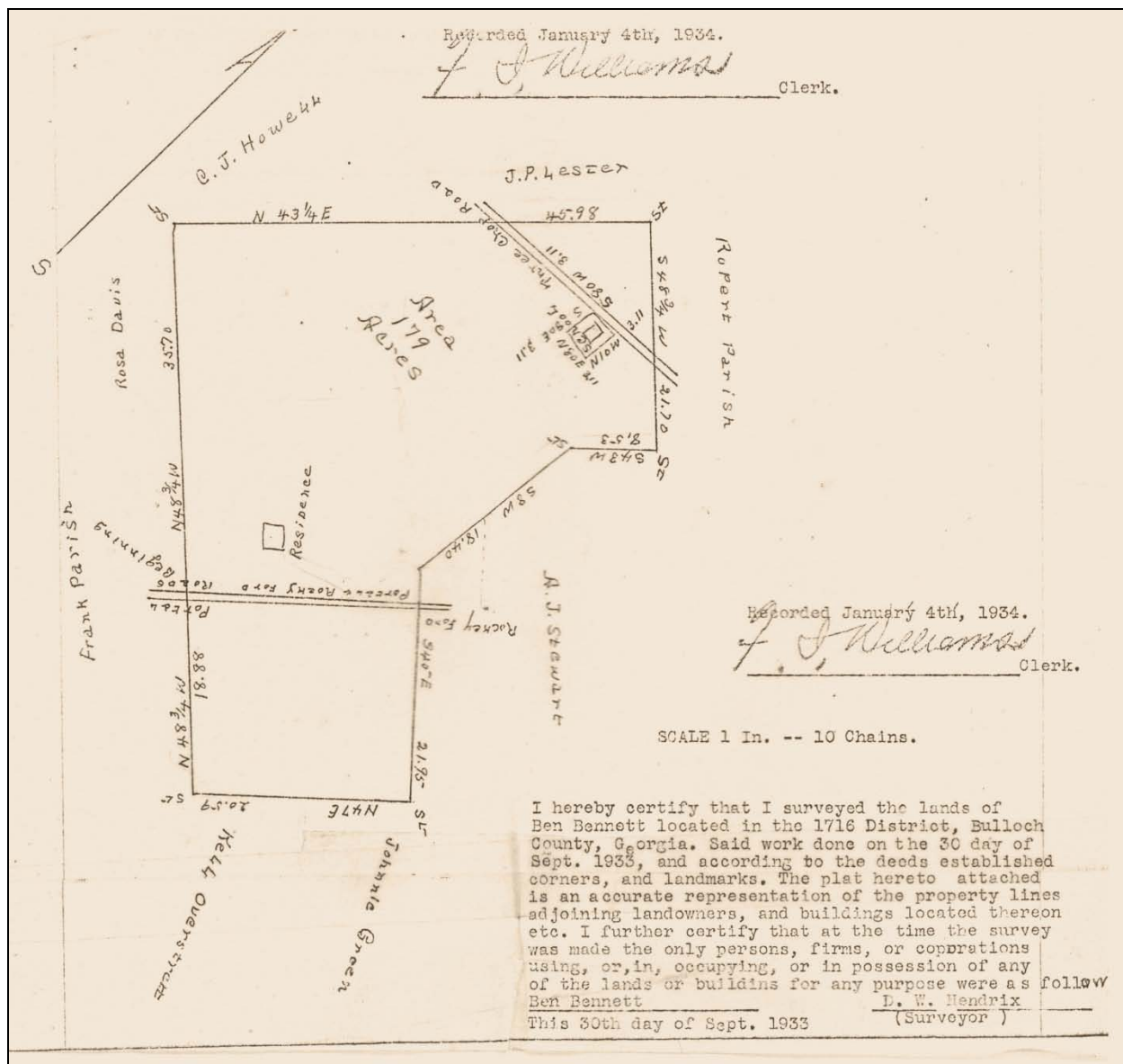
From this 1915 survey, we have wonderful photographs of these rural schools including the two African American schools that were closest to Bennett Grove: Johnson Grove which was located northeast across Highway 25 – here you see the school behind Johnson Grove Baptist Church.



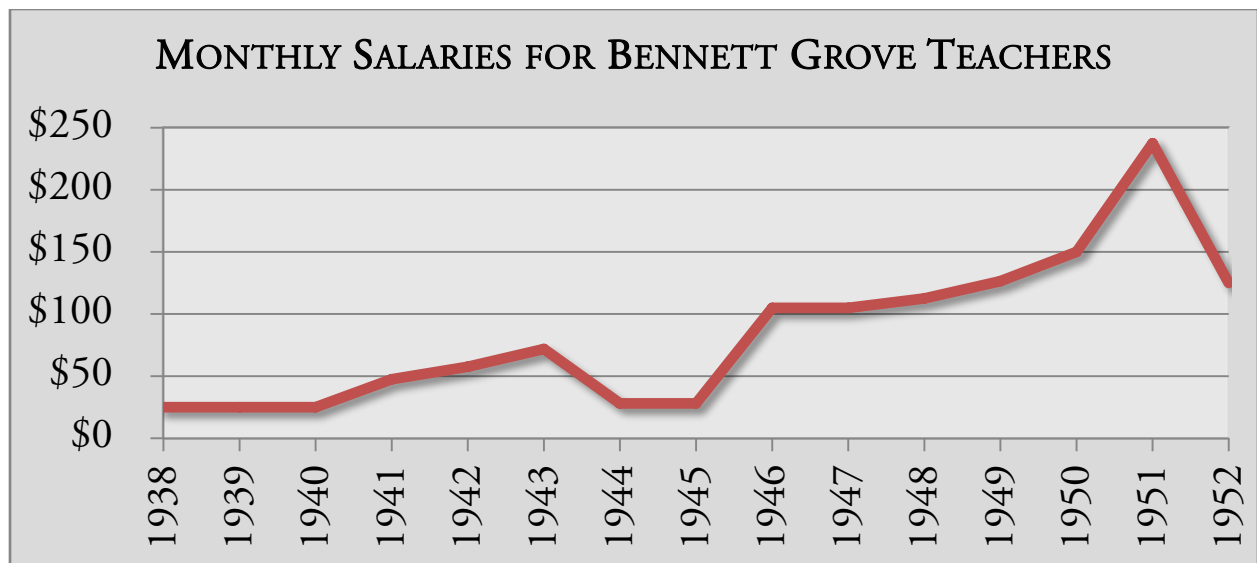
And Scarboro Grove, also known as the Portal School, which was just north of Portal itself.



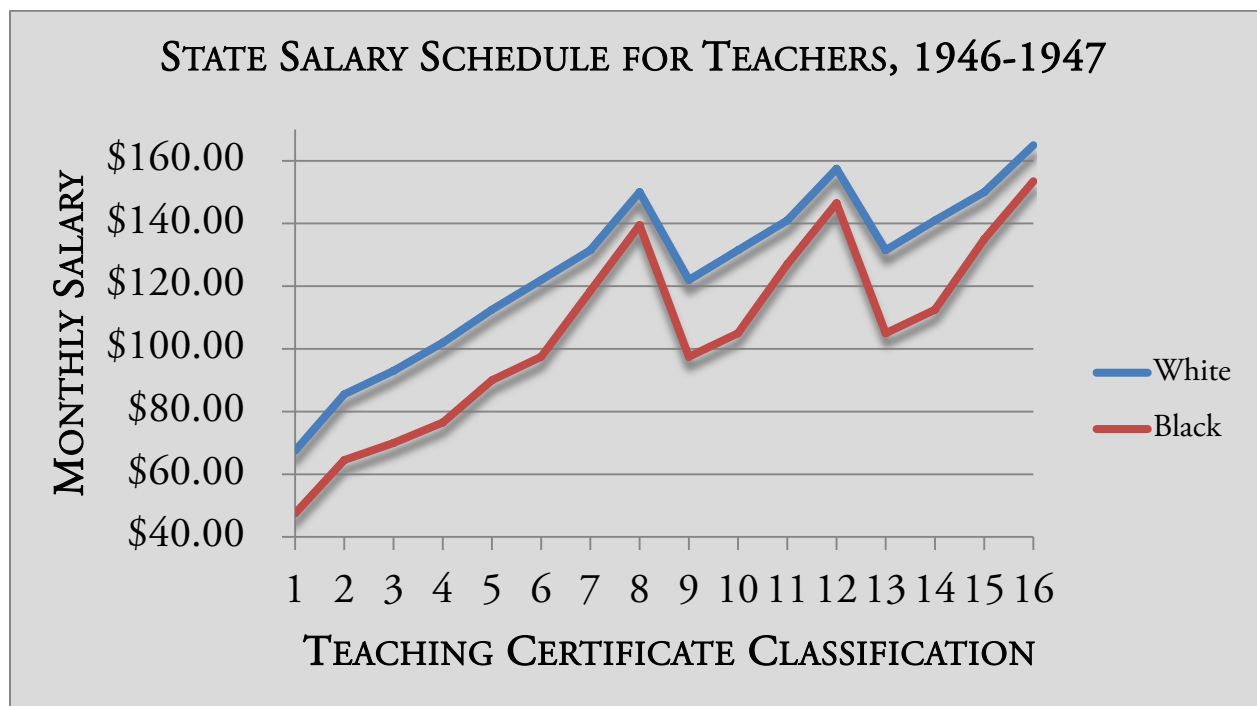
Since the school originated through the efforts of one man, the history of Benjamin Bennett and his family speaks to the history of the Bennett Grove School as well. Ben Bennett was born into slavery in 1856 in Brinsonville, Georgia, in Emanuel County. He was seven when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and nine when freedom came to him with the end of the Civil War. In 1882 he married Lois Wiggs, and together they had thirteen children, with eight surviving to adulthood. The Bennett family farmed their land in Emanuel County, which became Jenkins County, until 1917, when Ben Bennett purchased roughly 125 acres in Bulloch County. Mr. Bennett soon found the need to build a local school so his children would not have to walk several miles to either Johnson Grove or Scarboro Grove School.



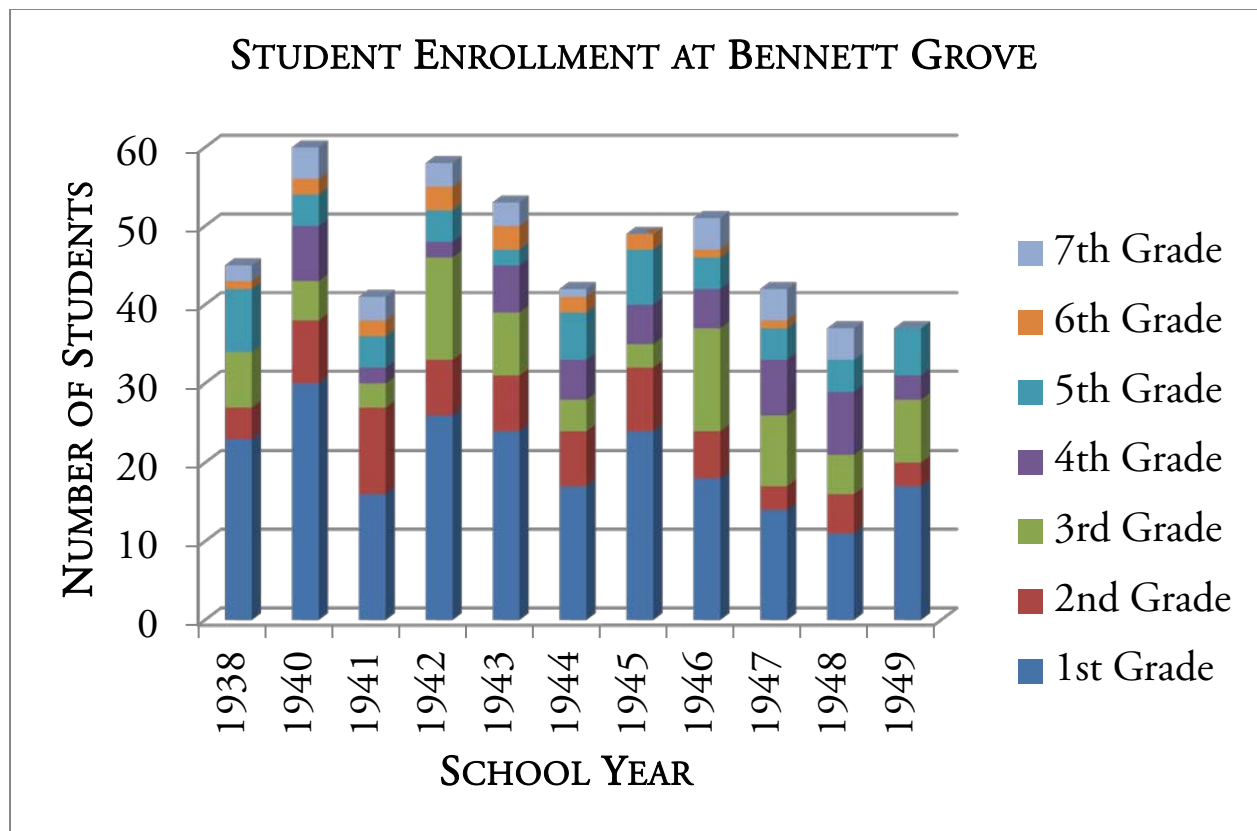
This plat from 1934 shows the Bennett land with the schoolhouse marked on it in the upper right corner. Benjamin Bennett died in 1941, having lived long enough to see a second generation of his family attend the school he built.



The Department of Education records at the Georgia Archives also held some information about the Bennett Grove School. This chart illustrates what available records show about the salaries of Bennett Grove teachers. Pay rates were based on levels of education, and they generally increased over time as more funding was raised for and devoted to African American schools.



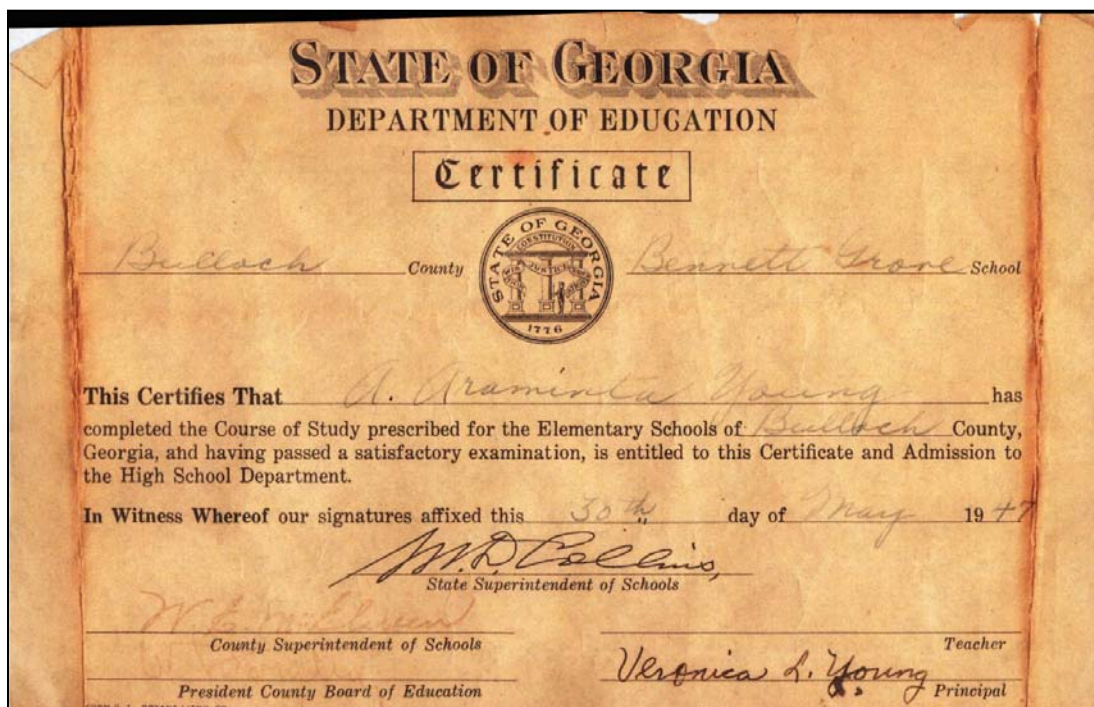
There were numerous different credentials granted to teachers in 1946-1947, all based on amount and level of education as well as amount of job experience. This graph illustrates the institutionalized discrimination through pay rates in that era for teachers with the same qualifications but with different skin colors. The peaks reflect the highest paid combinations of a certain level of education with many years of experience teaching. The top line follows salaries for white teachers, while the lower line follows salaries for black teachers.



This chart illustrates student enrollment data for Bennett Grove, which is available for most of the school's later years: 1938 and then 1940-1949. Each color in a bar represents the number of students in a certain grade level, and all of the grades add up to the total number of students who attended Bennett Grove that year. The biggest class was recorded in 1940 with 60 registered students, while 1948 and 1949 each had 37 students. The 1st grade had the largest number of students every year, and the upper grades consistently held far fewer. In 1949, there were no students registered for the 6th or 7th grades.



Much of what we know about the history of the school is owed to extensive research and interviews compiled by Dr. Enola Gay Smith Mosely for her 1999 dissertation in education from Georgia Southern, as well as dozens of interviews with former Bennett Grove teachers and students conducted over the past two decades by Dr. Alvin Jackson, president of the board of the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center. These records hold details about the people, activities, and even the architecture of the school in the memories of the students and teachers who were there. These memories help pictures of Bennett Grove take shape. Dr Jackson has been able to acquire pictures of many of the teachers and students of Bennett Grove, including this image of Sally Tape Hall, the first recorded teacher at the school (who taught from 1918 to around 1924), and this diploma awarded to Agnes Araminta Young when she graduated from Bennett Grove in 1947.





With all of these resources at our disposal - aerial photography, the 1915 educational survey of Bulloch County, family history, Department of Education records, and first-hand accounts - we can look at the school building itself in its historical context. We can answer architectural questions about the schoolhouse and learn a lot more about what Bennett Grove would have looked like between 1918 and 1952, when it was in use as a school. Bennett Grove may seem like a straightforward building at first glance, but it has a few tricks up its sleeve.

The first piece of the Bennett Grove puzzle is about heat. The idea that a building intended to hold kids on a daily basis would probably have some kind of heat source seems reasonable. Even a school in South Georgia needs heat, as the recent polar blasts have reminded all of us. But Bennett Grove as it stands right now has no fireplace, no chimney, and certainly no central heat. However, this is a big change from the building's early days. We know from the accounts of former students and teachers that a big part of a typical day at Bennett Grove was keeping the potbellied stove that occupied the center of the room constantly fueled: As Willie Alice Heard Johnson said, "We had a potbellied stove for heat in the winter. The parents would have to cut the wood and [gather] it outside the schoolhouse in a pile for their kids. The boys would carry the wood in the schoolhouse and put it into the stove, and class would resume." So although the potbellied stove is gone and there is no flue coming up through the roof, we do have a couple clues in the building today.



This picture shows the ceiling joists and the underside of the roof. Here you can see two iron straps at the level of the ceiling joists, and two thin pieces of wood running perpendicular to the ridgeline. These items are the remaining chimney supports. The potbellied stove likely sat straight beneath these supports almost directly in the center of the room, and the flue ran up through the roof here.



If we did have a picture of the inside of Bennett Grove when class was in session, it would look very similar to this. This is the Veazy School in Greene County, Georgia. The photo, used courtesy of the Library of Congress, was taken in October of 1941 by Jack Delano during a Farm Security Administration Survey. There is the potbellied stove, front and center, just like it would have been at Bennett Grove. Other characteristics from this image that match up with what we know about Bennett Grove from interviews are the students sitting side by side on benches around the periphery of the room, not in desks; the teacher has a table; and while the room is filled with natural light from the windows, there is a lamp hanging from the ceiling for use when it's especially dark.



Another missing element from the building's past is a porch that once shaded the front entry of the school. Again, we know from the memories of people who went there that a front porch once existed. Agnes Araminta Young stated that "a porch was on the outside where we would go to get our water break with bucket and dipper." And Pearl Lee Harden Parrish remembered the porch also served as a stage. She said, "the school was made from wood with a small porch connected to the front... Every Friday, the school had a Christian program where the students would stand on the porch and give speeches in front of fellow classmates and their parents."



Although some of the clapboards have pulled away from the building or have even come off entirely, the siding on the front of the school still shows evidence of a former porch roof. You can see boards that overlap in a different way than the rest in the front gable at the line from eave to eave. This line is where a shed roof would have attached to the main building, and the extra siding would have been required to cover the gaps, like flashing.



Here is an image of the Riggs School from the 1915 “Educational Survey of Bulloch County.” This photograph was taken of a schoolhouse about three years before Bennett Grove was constructed, and only 12 miles away on the west side of Statesboro. Just like with the picture of the Veazy School, we can use this photograph to get a feel for what Bennett Grove looked like. The Riggs School is shaped much like Bennett Grove, and its shed-roofed porch over the front door is a good example of what Bennett Grove may have had.

We know the school had a potbellied stove, and we know the flue once went straight up through the middle of the roof. But there is no chimney on the roof today, and this is because the current roof is not the original one. Bennett Grove was probably built with a wood shingle or shake roof. Wood shingles were cheaper than metal, and they could be made locally. Looking back at the image of the Riggs School again, the school and its porch have wooden shingles. Bennett Grove’s current galvanized crimped metal roof is probably the major element that has helped the schoolhouse survive this long.



One mystery of Bennett Grove that was a surprise involves the windows. It was not uncommon at the time Bennett Grove was constructed for rural buildings to have wooden shutters and no glass in the windows. One window at the school is still shuttered, complete with an old iron strap hinge, so it made sense that the others would also simply be shuttered. The cause of the mystery was thin strips of wood that you can see here in the upper half of a window frame on the west side of the building. These pieces of wood indicate that a glass window once existed here. It was probably a “fixed light,” a sash that can’t be moved up or down, at least on the top half. A few weeks ago, after some heavy rain, I found broken, old window glass on the ground just below this window.

The accounts of former students support the idea that Bennett Grove had at least one glass window at some point: Maude Lee Spells said that the school “had wooden windows and no electric lights. Later it seemed like we got some glass windows.” And Agnes Araminta Young said “I think there were wood shutter windows, but there might have been glass windows. There was no electricity in the building – we used light from the outside.” So it seems that Bennett Grove was originally built with wood shuttered windows. At some point in the school’s history, one or more glass windows were put in, and these little pieces of wood altering the window frame are all that is left of them on the building.



The last architectural question has to do with the building's changing role over time. In this picture of the interior you can see posts standing in the middle of the room, appearing to divide Bulloch County's last one-room African American schoolhouse into two rooms. However, these pieces of lumber do not match the posts used as studs in the outer walls, and the notching and angles cut near the ends reveal that they are actually rafters from either the old roof at Bennett Grove or another building entirely. They were likely put up in here after the school closed to make the building better fit a new purpose that needed two rooms.



Plans are already in motion for Bennett Grove. Last November, we had members of the Willow Hill Center and Georgia Southern's Student Anthropology Society clear out the brush that had grown up against the school. This was an obvious but important first step for preservation of the building, helping it dry out better after rains and keeping mold and insect damage at bay, and it also makes documentation and repair work easier.

Thanks to a grant from the Georgia Humanities Council, we held a symposium about Bennett Grove on February 8th to raise awareness about the school and interest in preserving it. We had a session of presentations in the morning, a reception at the Willow Hill School in Portal with the unveiling of a ten-panel exhibit about Bennett Grove, and a field trip to see the schoolhouse itself. About 70 people attended the event, including some former Bennett Grove students and Bennett family descendents.

We have the potential, thanks to Georgia Southern's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, to be able to conduct lidar scans at Bennett Grove. Lidar is a term for remote sensing technology that measures distance using lasers. With lidar, we can effectively take 3-dimensional scans of the schoolhouse, getting a very detailed snapshot of the condition the building is in right now, which is a powerful tool in documenting historic structures.

Bennett Grove is in need of stabilization. One of the first things you notice when you walk up to the school is that it is listing dangerously to one side. The building needs to be supported on that side and on the northeast corner which is pulling the building around and sideways. Moisture, termites, and time have taken their toll on the school's structural integrity. Almost all of the sill beams, the big horizontal beams that support the walls and floor joists, are compromised and need to be replaced. Many of the wall studs and corner posts have begun to rot or been eaten from the bottom up, and they need replacement or reinforcement. It is remarkably dry under the building, and as a result, most of the floor joists are still in good shape. Sections of floorboards are damaged, mainly where gaps in siding have allowed rainwater to collect and feed rot. The open windows and gaps in siding need to be covered to protect the structure and interior of the building from further water damage. As important as the metal roof has been to prolonging the life of the school, it needs help. We need to replace the sheets that have bent upward, exposing the southern corners of the building to rain.

Once the Bennett Grove school is stabilized, the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center plans to move the schoolhouse from its current site on Harold Howell Rd to the Willow Hill campus six miles away. From a historic preservation perspective, the setting of a building can be as important as the building itself. Changing the environment of a resource can detract from its historic character, like trading expansive fields around an old barn for gas stations and a bypass. The barn may still be there and in great shape, but the feeling is different. While this is important to keep in mind, every case should be considered on its own. In Bennett Grove's case, the planned move would be a good thing. Firstly, the pine tree closest to the schoolhouse has gotten so large that its trunk and roots are lifting the east side of the building. This is contributing to the lean in the building and will eventually push it all the way over. The school has to be moved at least a short distance away from this tree to stay standing, so keeping the building in its original location is already out of the question.

Once the building is moved, it will be easier to do archaeological testing in the footprint of the school and around the school grounds. This would be conducted with the expertise of Georgia Southern's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Through small excavations, we may find artifacts from the building's days as a school like toys misplaced by students at recess or dishes and animal bones from lunches and picnics at the school. Archaeological testing may not find any artifacts, but it is important to try to learn as much about a historic site as we can.

Most importantly, the planned move of Bennett Grove will give the school a modern purpose on the campus of Willow Hill that it simply could never have at its current location. This brings me to the ultimate plan for Bennett Grove: Giving it a new life as a one room schoolhouse museum. The Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center has already converted the historic Willow Hill School into a valuable community center of historical exhibits, genealogical archives, and enrichment programs. The Bennett Grove Schoolhouse will regain its position as a focal point of the community here, continuing its original mission of educating new generations.

Fundraising efforts for the Bennett Grove School project are underway, and a contribution in any amount would be greatly appreciated. Donations to this cause are tax-deductible and may be sent to the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center, P.O. Box 60277, Savannah, GA 31420.